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ABSTRACT

If children are not present in most travel literature--precisely because the genre has most typically been the domain of solitary male travelers who are escaping domestic obligation, routine, the familiar, and the family--they nevertheless are an integral part of the genre. The traveler is in many ways a child, an innocent abroad. Traveler writers enact again and again the archetypal journey of the child's leaving home. They are often in the position of children, like students learning a new language. Unfamiliar with foreign customs, currency, or terrain, they can be gullible and easily led, dependent on the kindness of strangers and vulnerable to parasites and touts who hang around train stations and hotels. Since the chance for genuine travel is rare for children, childhood is a time of vicarious travel--through reading and fantasy. The seeds of the desire to travel are sown in childhood. The literary return to the idealized and instinctual realm of childhood parallels many journeys of modern travel writers away from the industrial world to the pastoral, including D. H. Lawrence and Bruce Chatwin. Other writers such as Paul Theroux and Graham Greene are more skeptical of the idyllic vision of childhood and travel. (Contains 12 primary references to travel literature.) (TB)

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Childhood and Travel Literature

ED 384 874

Children are conspicuously absent from travel literature. Literary travel is an adult activity, and travel writers are solitary figures. If they have children, they rarely take them along for the trip. In popular culture, the subject of travel with children yields farces like Chevy Chase's Family Vacation movies--not really about travel, but rather a low form of tourism.

Real travel, as travel writers continuously remind us, is no vacation. They constantly defend themselves against the accusation that travel and travel writing, since they traffic in the world of leisure and holidays, are not serious. "Travel is work," Paul Fussell argues in his essay "The Stationary Tourist." "Etymologically a traveler is one who suffers travail." (235)

Children would render impossible the work of serious travel writers like Jonathan Raban, the late Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux. Picture Raban going down the Mississippi in his fragile boat with child in tow, or Chatwin in the wilds of Patagonia or the Australian outback. They could not function as writing travelers without complete freedom and solitude. In his latest travel book, Paddling the Happy Isles of Oceania, Theroux recounts how the family-minded Pacific Islanders call to him, "Where is Your Wife?" when they see him alone in his one-man kayak.

Most wives of travel writers are at home with the children.

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Perhaps that is one reason why there are fewer women travel writers than men. Mary Morris, who has written travel books about Mexico and the Trans-Siberian railroad, postponed marriage and childhood to escape the fate of her mother. In an essay entitled "Women and Journeys: Inner and Outer," Morris describes how her mother "...used to buy globes and maps and plan dream journeys she'd never take while her 'real life' was ensconced in the PTA, the Girl Scouts, suburban lawn parties, and barbecues." (26)

Children are part of that very world of home from which the travel writer must escape--the world of domestic obligation, the routine, the family and the familiar. That world defines childhood; children are creatures of home rather than the open road. In literature, a child traveling alone is often a pitable figure--lost or abandoned, an orphan, a refugee, a runaway. The journey from home marks the coming of age. Travel, Freud maintained, was essentially an escape from the father. Leaving home and taking to the road constitutes a farewell to paternal authority, freedom from the protective but confining environment of home, an embarkation on a rite of passage to adulthood. The childhood memoir or the bildungsroman generally ends when the child leaves home on some sort of journey--to the city, to the university, to sea, abroad. Travel in this sense marks the end of childhood and transforms the child into an adult.

Despite the natural opposition between the world of travel and the world of childhood, the traveler is in many ways a child,

an innocent abroad. Traveler writers enact again and again the archetypal journey of the child's leaving home. Moreover, the traveler in seeking to escape home is often seeking--parodoxically--to rediscover qualities of childhood. Travel may be work, but it also has many elements of play.

Travellers are often in the position of children, like students learning a new language. Unfamiliar with foreign customs, currency, or terrain, they can be gullible and easily led, dependent upon the kindness of strangers and vulnerable to parasites and touts who hang around train stations and hotels. But if travelling can summon up childlike fears and feelings of vulnerability, it also can bring back childhood impressionability and freshness of perception. The foreign and the unfamiliar open up the senses; colors are livelier, smells more pungent, tastes sharper. Like a child, one discovers challenge and delight in accomplishing simple tasks like making oneself understood, ordering a meal, finding the way back to the hotel. Ignorance of a foreign culture opens the imagination to hearsay, superstition, fantasy, creative misunderstanding. One of the charms of travel is that it recreates the conditions of innocence and a sense of wonder.

Since the chance for genuine travel is rare for children, childhood is a time of vicarious travel--through reading and fantasy. The seeds of the desire to travel are sown in childhood. The very act of reading is--for a child especially--a mode of travel. As Paul Fussell remarks in Abroad, his study of

British travel writing after World War I:

> To speak of "literary traveling" is almost a tautology, so intimately are literature and travel implicated with each other. Any child senses this, and any adult recalling his childhood remembers moments when reading was revealed to be traveling. (212)

Perhaps books about journeys exercise such power over children precisely because the possibilities of real travel are so limited for them. Jonathan Raban, growing up in rural England, saw his childhood "only as constriction." His voyage down the Mississippi, recounted in Old Glory (1981), owes its inspiration to a childhood reading of Huckleberry Finn:

> The picture on its cover, crudely drawn and colored, supplied me with the raw material for an exquisite and recurrent daydream....Going down the river turned into an obsessive ritual." (11,16)

Raban's adventure epitomizes Freud's notion of travel as escape from the father. Raban recalls fleeing the oppressive presence of his own unsympathetic father to a small river near his English home:

> "At the river, I was free to dream of what it might be like not to be a child; and all I could imagine was that there would be no father, no constraints....When I tried to make the River Wensum stretch as wide as the Mississippi, I suppose I was attempting to stretch it until it corresponded with the amazing breadth

of the freedom I thought I was going to enjoy as a grown-up. (140-141)

When Raban finally lives out his childhood dream of going down the Mississippi, he travels alone, but he carries a child in his imagination. The trip itself is a return to the idyll he imagined, a pastoral world created from Huckleberry Finn.

He continually measures the real Mississippi against the idealized one from his childhood vision. When he first confronts the river in Minnesota, he notes that "It wasn't the amazing blue of the cover of my old copy of Huckleberry Finn." (31) As he writes about his trip down the Mississippi, Raban combines impressions of the river with his boyhood expectations. The two genres which he mixes--travel narrative and childhood memoir, have common literary roots in the pastoral tradition. Both are forms of autobiography and both became especially popular in the nineteenth century, following the romantic reaction to industrialism.

Travel books, Fussell argues, are "subspecies of memoir" and "displaced pastoral romances."(Abroad, 209) He locates the Golden Age of travel in the middle of the nineteenth century, and sees the same flight from modern industrial society repeated in the 1920's, when British writers were escaping the ugliness of postwar England to the warmer and sunnier world of the Mediterranean. The very essence of travel writing, he argues, is the journey away from the unattractive present to the romanticized past. Literary travel constitutes

> ...an implicit rejection of industrialism and everything implied by the concept `modern northern Europe'... One travels to experience the past...literary accounts of journeys take us very deeply into the center of instinctive imaginative life." (212)

Like the travel book, the autobiography of childhood can be a spiritual quest, a literary journey back to a past when instinct and imagination were at the heart of an existence colored by nostalgia and the mists of memory. In his survey of childhood autobiography, When the Grass Was Taller (1984), Richard Coe finds that the literary form of the childhood memoir crystallized around the mid-nineteenth century, about the same time that the travel book was in its heyday; "the Childhood," as he calls the form, arose as a genre after the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution, "each in its own way hard at work destroying the past." The Childhood has common roots with the the travel narrative in their use of a pastoral tradition, "in nostalgia for the simplicities of a vanished Garden of Eden." (241)

This kind of literary return to the idealized and instinctual realm of childhood parallels many journeys of modern travel writers away from the industrial world to the pastoral. D.H. Lawrence in his travel books about Italy, the Mediterranean, the American Southwest, and Mexico, represents as dramatically as any modern travel writer the quest for the pastoral ideal of an illusory Golden Age. In his oft-quoted statement on the basic

human desire to travel, Lawrence invokes the mythical childhood of man:

> We do not travel in order to go from one hotel to another, and see a few side-shows. We travel, perhaps, with a secret and absurd hope of setting foot on the Hesperides, of running up a little creek and landing in the Garden of Eden. (343)

Lawrence did as much as any writer to make the travel book a record of an inner as well as an outer journey, the traveller's introspective search combined with an account of people and places along the way.

For many writers, these inner and outer journeys are atavistic in nature. Bruce Chatwin links a yearning for a mythic past to his own childhood as he explores the basic human urge to travel in The Songlines (1987), his narrative about the Australian Aborigines. Chatwin argues that our desire to travel is instinctive, because humans first evolved as travelers--as hunters who walked across grasslands--and that nomadic cultures, like the Aborigines, are purer in spirit than settled, city-building civilizations.

Chatwin not only idealizes the primitive; he traces a universal human desire for travel to man's origins as a walker on the savannahs of Africa. This idealization of the primitive places Chatwin in a 200-year old tradition of travel writing. Fussell traces the traveler's fascination with the primitive to the 1700's:

> Contributing to the rise of tourism in the nineteenth century was the bourgeois vogue of romantic primitivism. From James "Ossian" McPherson in the late eighteenth century to D.H. Lawrence in the early twentieth, intellectuals and others discovered special virtue in primitive peoples and places. ("Tourist," 32)

This special virtue often attaches to the traveller's childhood as well, which serves to link traveler and primitive. The picture of an idealized primitive family on the cover of The Songlines comes from a book Chatwin read as a child; he identified himself strongly with the small boy in this first family.

Paul Theroux is more skeptical of the pastoral ideal. In his most recent travel book, The Happy Isles of Oceania (1993), he explores the South Pacific, a traditional site for Edenic visions, and remarks "As soon as a place gets a reputation for being paradise, it goes to hell." (370) Theroux generally reveals less than other travel writers about his own inner journey, but in the opening line of his very first travel book, The Great Railway Bazaar (1975), he acknowledges the childhood origins of his desire to travel. "Ever since childhood, when I lived within earshot of the Boston and Maine [railroad], I have seldom heard a train go by and not wished I was on it."

The only book by Theroux in which children accompany the traveler is significantly a work of fiction rather than non-fiction--The Mosquito Coast (1982), a contemporary version of The

Swiss Family Robinson, the classic account of the family as travelers. Theroux's own trip to Latin America, the subject of his travel book The Old Patagonian Express (1979), provided many of the details of landscape and culture for the novel.

It is the story of a failed attempt to return to the Edenic childhood of man. Allie Fox, the protagonist and vehement critic of contemporary American civilization, escapes to the jungles of Central America to establish a family commune free of the evils of modern society. Fox, a brilliant inventor, brings a machine to this primitive world--an ice-making apparatus called "Fat Boy," a kind of demonic mechanical child which brings about the destruction of his jungle paradise. The fact that the novel's narrator is a disillusioned child (Fox's son) heightens the irony of this anti-pastoral odyssey.

Graham Greene is another writer opposed in temperament to an idyllic vision of childhood and travel. In his travel book about West Africa, Journey Without Maps (1936), he focuses on the hardship, monotony, and squalor of a trip through Liberia. Despite the general gloom of this world, however, he sees a value in it all because its childhood associations rejuvenate him.

> Oh, one wanted to protest, one doesn't believe, of course, in 'the visionary gleam,' in the trailing glory, but there was something in that early terror and bareness of one's needs, a harp strumming behind a hut, a witch on the nursery landing, a handful of kola nuts, a masked dancer....The sense

> of taste was finer, the sense of pleasure
> keener, the sense or terror deeper and purer...
> I was discovering in myself a thing I thought I
> had never possessed: a love of life. (208,277)

His journey expands beyond a sense of self-renewal; he evokes a collective childhood of man. Greene speaks of travel as a kind of psychoanalysis, a seeking out of "the past from which one has emerged." The masked dancers of Liberia strike him as familiar rather than exotic. "One had the sensation of having come home, for here one was finding associations with a personal and racial childhood, one was being scared by the same old witches." (109)

Greene's attraction to the play element of Liberian culture--the dance, the masks, the music--figures strongly in his connection of Africa to childhood. And it underlines one reason why many English writers fled the country after World War I; they were also fleeing the drudgery of wartime work.

Play, like travel, is underestimated as a significant human activity, because it is not considered as serious as work. In arguing for the seriousness of play (the distinctive activity of children), Richard Coe distinguishes between what he calls the "real" and the "alternative" dimensions of human activity. Activity in the "real" or "work" dimension is materially productive and helps sustain man's existence as an animal. Activity in the "alternative" or "play" dimension is not materially productive; it is gratuitous, done for its own sake.

In this analysis, travel belongs to the "alternative" dimension. Travel, like play, is done for its own sake. And travel is no less serious for being considered play. "In fact," says Coe, 'play' is the most supremely serious of all human activities, because it alone either constructs, reveals, or refers back to a system of values which transcends the drab and stultifying restrictiveness of deterministic utilitarianism." (252)

Thus the child and the traveller are players, in the sense that they act in an "alternative" dimension, one apaft from the common daily routines of work. The activity they perform by virtue of being child or traveller is play--free, imaginative, spontaneous, but useful in an aesthetic rather than a narrowly utilitarian way.

Mary Morris avoided the conventional utilitarian role of housewife that prevented her mother from traveling. In her journey from China to Eastern Europe, the subject of her recent book entitled Wall to Wall, Morris travels in search of a world made vivid to her through stories which her grandmother told to her as a child. Her train ride across Siberia becomes an odyssey back to her ancestral home, the Ukraine of her grandmother's childhood. Her own sense of home in the Chicago suburbs becomes inseparable from grandmother's childhood in the Ukraine:

> In all her stories, made-up and real alike, the meek triumphed, wrongs were made right, the beautiful, the

great survived. It was a child's world, one I came back to again and again. (7)

Like most travel writers, Morris is travelling alone; the search for home becomes the search for a deep human bond. Denied the possibility of visiting her grandmother's village because of the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, Morris shifts her yearning to the child within her--both symbolically and literally, since she realizes on the journey that she is pregnant.

The longing to visit the archetypal home becomes a longing to have a child, to end the loneliness that marks the journey of the solitary traveler. She sees a family of travelers, each child wearing a backpack, and her desire becomes clear to her: "I knew then that I wanted to have a child to journey with, to see the world." (168)

The child within is herself as well, the childhood of her past, her memory. Her grandmother had recounted a tale of being buried alive in the Ukraine to escape the pograms of the Cossacks. Morris identifies the image of the buried child as a symbol of her quest, the very motive for her trip. "In my own way I had buried a child of my own. Not the one I was going to have, but the one I had been." (239)

The return to the home of one's childhood, the place that is strongest or earliest in memory, is a kind of ultimate journey, a mythic return which completes the cycle begun by the departure from home. Like the literature of travel, childhood autobiography is grounded in a strong sense of place. The former

is a journey outward, away from home, towards the discovery of place; the latter is a return to home as a place rediscovered in memory.

In an essay entitled "Autobiographical Memory and Sense of Place," Rockwell Gray writes:

> "My pleasure or displeasure in a particular landscape or interior carries within it roots deep in my first years of life. As we do not see landscape and the natural world without instruction from art--without the perceptual frames and visual conventions regnant in our culture--neither do we respond to any place without the informing presence of many remembered places and experiences layered palimpsest-like in consciousness."

Childhood affects travel literature precisely in this way; it is a palimpsest of memory, desire, and impression--an earlier manuscript which lies beneath the travel narrative and guides it. Childhood is the temporal dimension of a space that was home. Rooted in collective origins as migratory animals, myths of primal innocence, and the memory of earlier years, the travel impulse in these writers leads away from one home while at the same time it seeks another, more fundamental sense of home. And wherever the outer journey may lead, the inner journey of these travel writers draws continually on the presence of the child within.

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